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ABSTRACT

To stimulate students to learn through creative participation and to make literature a live experience, an experimental film making project was conducted with freshmen at Bimidji State College during the 1969-70 term. The first step was to introduce film-making to the students. This was accomplished through viewing and analyzing brief "experiential" films. The second step was to define guidelines that are applicable to both visual and verbal composition; during this step, the class learned that poetry depends upon sensations and ordinary observations of experiences. The film-making project of the class was an effort to merge poetry with the visual and the auditory. The third step of the experiment was the actual production of short films and a demonstration of the principles of composition. The class prepared the script from essays written by the students on poems discussed in class; they then edited the script, chose music and sound effects, and filmed the final product. It is through the process of evaluation and script writing that the relationship of the visual and verbal media is most apparent. (DB)

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Film-Making and Teaching Composition

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Since the rise of universal college education in the United States, there have been increasing cries of alarm in academic circles about the unwillingness of today's students to read. Newsweek critic Jack Kroll wrote that "the act of reading is not central to the youthful sensibilities of our age, which have forgotten that this act is the original, the true psychedelic experience" (April 13, 1970). And Karl Shapiro, one of our most respected contemporary thinkers, wrote in a nationally serialized newspaper editorial that we are experiencing a "literary breakdown," a vulgarization of young minds seduced by "kitsch-camp-op-pop-absurdist-revolutionary sweepings and swill" (Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, April 19, 1970). Shapiro arrogantly accuses today's youth in sweeping generalizations of snivelling self-pity, "mindlessness," and subjective "gibberish."

Now it is evident that many college students suffer from verbal and visual illiteracy in that they lack the sensitivity to appreciate good books and good films. There is a definite breakdown in "sensibility" and it is alarming. However, what most advocates of academic despair often fail to realize is that the contemporary young person is not without great emotional and intellectual potentials. This is, indeed, the age of television and films more than a great age of literature; but, contrary to much academic assumption, the influence of film is not necessarily negative. Teachers who scoff at films and expect only 30% of their students to learn what they teach are more at fault, I submit, than their subjective students. Although movies are visual, they do deal with principles of composition, with character, with plot, with symbols, and with moral implications. If verbal literacy has suffered, then educators must find a means of restoring its value. Today's students have a highly developed visual imagination, and this alone perhaps makes them better potential learners than students of preceding generations. Literacy is not merely the province of the printed page, because it involves numerous senses and media.

An experimental freshman class at Bemidji State College during the 1969-70 term produced several short films and studied the relationships of verbal and visual composition. It was a successful effort to fuse the interest of the teacher in poetry,

fiction, and non-fiction with the interest of the students in film, "rock," and the "hippie" movement--what Shapiro and others call "kitsch." It was an effort to involve the freshmen with structural principles and to stimulate the discussion of literature. The goal was not simply to teach rules of composition but to stimulate the students to learn through creative participation and to make literature come alive.

The Bemidji students produced "interpretive" films based upon poetry--"interpretive" in the sense that it is impossible to establish literal visual images for poetry and in the sense that the class had to select symbols and settings and music. It is evident that the potential of short student films need not be limited to poetry alone, nor to lyrical poetry alone. The alternatives are perhaps limitless given an imaginative teacher and interested students. The specific goal of the experiment at Bemidji was to relate visual and verbal composition in conjunction with learning English, though. A documentary film tends to detract from literary relevance, and a feature film or a dramatic film is too complex and requires too much time. Consequently, the short lyrical poem, which is suitable to short films, was ideal for the purposes of the project.

The first step was to introduce film-making to freshmen. This was done by viewing brief "experiential" films. Through an analysis of such films, the class learned techniques which they could use in producing their own films. Many, available through companies and universities through the country, include films dealing with numerous facets of experience and reality, such as sand dunes, the sea, or the journey of a leaf into oblivion. (A few major outlets include Pyramid Films Corp., P. O. Box 1048, Santa Monica, Calif., 90406; McGraw-Hill Films, 330 West 42nd St., New York, New York, 10036; and Field Services, Audio-Visual Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind., 47401.) One film which particularly fascinated the students was the Kodak production "The Searching Eye" about a young boy's developing powers of observation. Throughout the film, the camera juxtaposed what the boy saw, like a bird in flight, with more universal human impulses, such as flight and the conquest of space. The film did an excellent job of relating the subjective experience with the aspirations and knowledge of mankind. Sensibility, therefore, begins with observation.

The second step was to define guidelines applicable to both visual and verbal composition. Over-all Design: Every film and everything written in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction adheres to some controlling emotion or concept. As essays require outlines, films require carefully planned scripts. Coherence, Transition, and Continuity: Both films and literature of necessity are based upon sequential images or scenes which must be linked coherently to achieve the specified effect. Emphasis, Economy, and Selectivity: In order to fulfill the over-all

intention, both verbal and visual forms of expression require moments of emphasis, the elimination of irrelevant details and actions, and the selection of settings, symbols, or incidents which will best develop the themes. As the students could see demonstrated in the commercial films--or even in feature films or in television commercials--repetition is one of the most common techniques and involves motifs that often develop suggestive levels of meaning through symbols.

Although film and literature have similar principles of composition, they can be radically different. Whereas film has spatial-temporal restrictions, poetry is not as limited. Whereas film involves the senses in a denotative, concrete manner, poetry is more flexible, more ambiguous, more connotative, and more imaginative. How does one, for instance, visualize Shelley's "The sea-blooms and the oozy wood which wear/ The sapless foliage of the ocean"? Film has been an impersonal, public media, whereas poetry has been a subjective personal experience. One person may write a poem or read it, but dozens make a film and great numbers see it. Film is involved with social and factual experiences, but literature, especially lyrical poetry, is involved with psychological and emotional experiences.

Nevertheless, the visual and verbal media are both extensions of the same human power of sensibility. Both are dynamic in that they constantly shift focus visually and imaginatively. If anything, films have become more poetic and more verbal in order to involve viewers more subjectively and to penetrate beyond the physical exterior and surface. Consequently, we have seen in recent feature films an increasing attempt to break spatial and temporal barriers through flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness, and psychedelic effects. Film has, in other words, sought "objective correlatives" for emotional experiences.

In the process of viewing commercial films and attempting to define guidelines, the Bemidji class learned that poetry depends in its basic composition principles upon sensations and ordinary observations of experiences, although its ultimate effect was far more emotional than the surface representations of a film. For example, Robert Frost created his poetry out of the materials of the New England countryside--the animals, trees, seasons, and farm rituals. Although much poetry is far too abstract to be clearly visualized, it is also true that most poetry derives from the phenomenological reality of commonplace objects and events. Witness, for instance, the poetry of Emily Dickinson or William Carlos Williams. It was Coleridge who said that poetry is a merging of the concrete and the abstract. The film-making project at Bemidji was an effort to merge poetry with the visual and the auditory, with as many facets of sensibility as possible. The films produced by the students, therefore, combined the visual and verbal with a musical background.

The third step of the experimental class was the process of actually producing short films and demonstrating the principles of composition to the students. The class was voluntarily divided into interest groups. The script team took all the essays written on the poems discussed in class, condensed them, and reworked them into a finished script--essentially a highly detailed outline. This included pictorial representations or drawings for each sequence of images. Three film teams were established on the premise that filming is best done by groups of three or four. Each group had its opportunity to do actual filming. Another group was selected to edit and put together the final product. The sound-synchronization group was composed of students interested in music and sound effects. Most of the class, consequently, was involved in the project. If a similar venture is undertaken elsewhere, it is possible that one general group of interested students could handle the entire operation in all its facets.

For the initial experiment, the instructor selected several poems which loaned themselves to visualization and to the limitations of the season--winter. Among these were Robert Frost's "Desert Places" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Wallace Stevens' "Snow Man," Kenneth Rexroth's "Snow Storm," and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Snow Storm." In such a project it is recommended that the students be given greater leeway than several poems; it might be possible, for example, to produce a film interpreting the lyrics of a popular song.

It is through the process of evaluation and script writing that the greatest benefits occur in relating the visual and verbal media. Analysis of the poems revealed the power of figurative language and demonstrated the differences between denotation and connotation. On the literal level, "Desert Places" operates spatially and temporally within definite limitations, beginning with the downward motion of "Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast." A lonely man pauses by a snow-covered field and is overwhelmed by its emptiness. The movement of the poem goes from the skies across the barren field, into the woods, and finally to animal lairs before returning to the "empty spaces" of the sky. The final movement is psychological and penetrates the "desert places" within the man. In effect, Frost's poem operates sequentially much like a film. The visual reality becomes emblematic through its process of accumulation of the internal emptiness of an individual who finds no meaning in reality.

Given this spatial and psychological movement, the students concentrated on the actual montage, shot by shot. A first rule of verbal analysis is that the individual slow down the vague, elusive imaginative processes. For instance, some of the first spontaneous scripts called for a total of one minute of filming

because students were unable to relate external time to the internal process. The crucial problem in communicating one's feelings and insights is that one must halt the rapid speed of impulsive associations, to organize a response. Self-expression is a discipline. The imagination, the realm of verbal power, has much more scope and breadth than the visual reality, for it includes not simply the physical but also the psychological and the spiritual. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

> The brain is wider than the sky,
> For, put them side by side,
> The one the other will contain
> With ease--and you beside.
>
> The brain is deeper than the sea,
> For, hold them, blue to blue,
> The one the other will absorb,
> As sponges, buckets do.

The imagination is quicker than the visual image and can contain all the sequences of a film. It breaks spatial, and temporal, barriers. Emily Dickinson also wrote:

> Infection in the sentence breeds--
> We may inhale despair
> At distance of centuries
> From the malaria.
> ("A Word Dropped Careless on a Page")

Through the film-making a teacher may make such truths evident, and he may thereby broaden the sensibilities of his students.

A second rule of verbal analysis is that the writer always must become more specific and detailed. The Bemidji students encountered problems when they attempted to describe in the script the exact visual representations they wished to film. Emptiness is easy to film. It calls for a snow-filled field and a gray, bleak sky. But what about the lonely man? Is he to be young, middle-aged, or old? The students argued this point and concluded that he was to be an old man. The "absent-spirited" definition given by Frost is ambiguous, but the total effect of his poem is more suggestive. Snow is falling, the end of the year is near, the end of the day is near, and the "few weeds and stubble showing last" all imply that the fullness of life has passed.

A comparison of student scripts--and every student wrote his own version--demonstrated the differences in sensibility between members of the class. For one student, the persona was just a man. For another, it was "a man slumped by defeat and coldness whose face is half hidden by his collar." For another, it was a small figure walking down an old dirt road in

an isolated place beneath a darkening sky.

A third rule of composition is that the writer follow patterns of transition or punctuation. In the poem, Frost uses not only the line and stanza, but also directs the imagination with periods, semicolons, and the like--as students themselves must do in writing. In the film, the imagination is directed by cinematic techniques such as fade-in and fade-out. Communication depends, in the final analysis, on form and pattern.

When the actual filming day arrived for "Desert Places," three students, one "actor," and the instructor drove to a secluded road and spent two and a half hours filming about eight minutes of film. Since the poem repeats its mood so often--Frost uses the words "loneliness," "lonely," or "it" eight times --the film team selected symbolic representations for the words --a solitary leaf, a tree trunk sunk in snow, a broken limb, and concealed holes for the "animal lairs" of the poem. In this way, the visualization adhered to the principles of repetition, selectivity, and symbolism. The screen images attempted to correlate the verbal and emotional experience. Yet it must be remembered that the film will always remain one possibility, one interpretation.

Another rule of composition which the students discovered was that of juxtaposition. In poetry, we encounter the comparisons and contrasts of figurative language. In film, we are presented the side by side shots that establish tone. For instance, the "Desert Places" film goes from the man's face to the field, from the man's face to the woods, from the sky to the man's face, and so on. The visual images of loneliness of isolation were constantly juxtaposed with the man in order to build up towards the definition of his own internal isolation.

In conclusion, it can be recommended that other colleges allocate funds for similar projects. If students approach poetry with rigid, undeveloped sensibilities, they will leave capable of reading with more appreciation if they attempt to create a film version. As one Bemidji student wrote in a critique of the experiment, "I can't look at woods or fields any more without thinking of poetic images or film shots." The poem had come alive through the film, and the student had discovered for himself the dynamic process of the imagination. The students also learned basic principles of composition. Another critique said that the script writing assignments enabled the student to learn how to order her own thoughts and make them concrete. The final step, that of editing and adding sound, also demonstrated the necessity of pruning irrelevant details and of correlating the auditory and imaginative experience. Sensitivity, then, is not limited to one sense nor to one media. It is a power of reconciling the internal and the external.

How does the college teacher implement a film-making program? It is not without difficulties. The most apparent problem is the lack of academic training among instructors that would qualify them to produce films. Nevertheless, with some basic research, any teacher could handle the project. He can turn to numerous books and articles. The National Council of Teachers of English in Champaign, Illinois, provides free bibliographies. Numerous articles are available through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at the National Cash Register Company, 4936 Fairmont Avenue, Bethesda, Maryland, 20014. Perhaps the richest source of materials is the Consumer Market Division of Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, New York, 14650. See, for instance, "Pictorial Continuity, How to Shoot a Movie Story," Meredith Press, 250 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; "The Motion Picture and the Teaching of English," Appleton-Century-Crofts, 440 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016; A Casebook on Film by Charles Thomas Samuels, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., New York, N.Y., 10001. See, also, the Winter, 1970, issue of the Minnesota English Journal.

The teacher can also turn to his audio-visual department. There must be one or more Super-8 Cameras and projectors; there must be editors and tape recorders. During the Bemidji experiment, an audio-visual consultant worked closely with the students on several occasions. He gave a lecture on films and film handling. In addition, he accompanied the film teams on field trips. Since an expert was available, the Bemidji project also produced some 16 MM films, which are of course of a higher quality than Super-8 since they can be reproduced. However, 16 MM films cost about three times more to make than Super-8. The average 200 foot, 10 minute Super-8 film costs approximately $30--and this includes the cost of film, developing, and the addition of a sound track. A budget of $100, therefore, would cover at least three Super-8 films, or more if they are of shorter duration. Costs can be cut by putting sound on a magnetic tape instead of a sound track.

Audio-visual experts will tell you films are produced by amateurs on a 3-1 or 4-1 ratio. For every three films shot, one can be put together after editing. But I would point out that during the Bemidji project an almost 1-1 ratio was achieved on a few of the films because of the emphasis placed on pre-planning. If the scripts are carefully developed, and if the film-makers are willing to go through the extensive maneuvering required to actually make the film in the sequence it is planned, costs can be kept down and students will learn more about the value of pre-composition.

The teacher must be the coordinator; he must set up a working schedule which permits pre-planning, filming, and the two weeks needed for developing and editing, as well as the several

weeks necessary for addition of sound tracks. It is his job to make the films relevant to literature and to composition. Most of a film-making project should be an out-of-class assignment. Instead of assigning ten themes, in other words, those students working on the films might only write eight. Instead of assigning overloads of reading and writing, the teacher could assign important short poems and ask students to first write an essay evaluating the poems and then to write a full script on how they might film the poems. That, in itself, is a process of teaching that stresses the student's own act of discovery. And if the contemporary teacher is to help illiterate students become literate, if he is to broaden their sensibilities, he must offer them a learning project that involves them in creative participation.

Ronald L. Lycette, who teaches at Bemidji State College, gave this account of his film program at the MCTE Eleventh Spring Conference in Duluth in May 1970.